

Winter 2013 Householder
Hélène Laverdière, MP for Laurier – Ste-Marie
English Translation

My dear fellow citizens,

A new session of Parliament has begun and it promises to be as busy as ever. The fall session of Parliament illustrated the challenges facing Canadians when it comes to the Conservative government's disdain for transparency, accountability, and democracy. These challenges can be seen in the F-35 scandal, in the changes to Employment Insurance, in the CNOOC purchase of Nexen, and of course in the latest omnibus budget bill that eliminates environmental protections for most Canadian lakes and rivers.

The contested decisions and choices of the Conservative government have aroused the indignation of many citizens and many civil society groups, who have stepped up their mobilization to protect our social and democratic achievements and the values of peace and social justice that we want to see at the heart of our society and our development.

Parliament has been the scene of several vibrant debates this Fall. I have been particularly busy because of my Private Member's Bill C-398, *Medicines for All*. This was a humanitarian bill which would have cost taxpayers nothing and made it possible to save lives in many developing countries. Unfortunately it was defeated by only seven votes. Moreover, the decisions affecting the mandate of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), especially the one concerning aid to Haiti, as well as the irresponsible statements by Minister Fantino, have kept me very busy as the Official Opposition's Critic for International Development.

The NDP has also formally opposed the punitive reforms of Employment Insurance introduced by the Conservative government. Under this plan, some unemployed people will have to accept any job within a radius of one hour by road from their residence, or else lose their benefits. This will inevitably result in an exodus of labour in many parts of the country, in addition to unjustly punishing seasonal workers. For this reason we have begun to fight this reform on a number of fronts, including the House of Commons, where we asked the government no fewer than 37 questions. We have also held a series of public meetings across the country to hear from, and provide information to, citizens.

Happily, constituency work is always an opportunity for rewarding encounters – in particular, my meeting with the members of *Projet Changement*, a community centre for seniors in Grand Plateau (see the next page). I had the chance to join them, as well as many other groups, during their Christmas activities.

In addition to these meetings, I continue to work tirelessly with civil society partners and other elected officials on issues related to homelessness and housing. I have visited and spoken directly with people and resources working in the field, and also taken part in dialogues among various community stakeholders, including elected officials, community workers, merchants and residents. I salute the fine initiatives recently implemented downtown, and I am sure that they will demonstrate how effective a collaborative approach can be.

In the months ahead, together with my colleague Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet, Member of Parliament for Hochelaga and Official Opposition housing critic, we will continue our work on the matter of the upcoming expiry of federal agreements made with numerous social housing projects in the riding, agreements for which no renewal has been announced. This is a critical situation for many households and communities who are living in uncertainty as to the future of subsidies that guarantee them access to housing tailored to their income. At a time when neighbourhoods such as Le Plateau and Centre-sud are already facing significant accommodation challenges, we cannot afford to lose our social housing stock, and it is unacceptable for the federal government to withdraw from this issue and pass responsibilities off to the provinces. I invite all citizens who are worried or who want to get involved to contact their housing committees or our team to get more information and to share their views on this question.

With the interesting projects and measures put in place to protect and stimulate the incredible cultural and artistic vitality of the Saint-Viateur Est sector, I will continue to support local initiatives to break that sector's isolation and permit the development of safe pedestrian crossings on the Canadian Pacific tracks at the boundary with the adjacent riding of Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, which is represented by my colleague, MP Alexandre Boulerice. Together with elected municipal officials and civil society organizations, we will try to finally get what citizens have been demanding for too long now.

Finally, I hope that the coming year brings hope and confidence in our collective ability to take action to change things and protect the progressive democratic values that inspire us. 2012 saw citizen campaigns and demonstrations against the disastrous policies of the Conservative government, as well as the Idle No More movement, which has united indigenous and non-indigenous peoples in demanding both equality and respect in their relationships and the protection of our shared environmental heritage. There is little danger of that wind of activism dying out!

Above all, I am interested in finding out what issues concern you, as that will help me carry out my task of representing you in Ottawa more effectively.

Rejection of Bill C-398

Last November 28, my Private Member's Bill C-398, *Medicines for All*, designed to reform Canada's Access to Medicines Regime (CAMR), was defeated in the House of Commons by seven votes, 148 to 141. I would like to give you an overview of what happened during our campaign and what led to this disappointing outcome.

Over the past year and a half I have met with all stakeholders involved in this issue: the brand-name pharmaceutical industry; the generic pharmaceutical companies that had used CAMR in the past, who explained to me why the system was broken; representatives from a broad network of civil society organizations; activists supporting the bill; and my colleagues in the other parties in the House of Commons.

We obtained confirmation that Canada's research-based pharmaceutical companies were in favour of seeing Bill C-398 go to committee – a major step forward. We informed the Conservatives that, with the brand-name and the generic manufacturers on board, there were no further obstacles to this legislation being referred to committee. Many newspapers all over the country published editorials in support of the bill, and many citizen lobby groups (such as the Grandmothers Advocacy Network: see photo below) stepped up their activism around the country.

In the end we lost by seven votes. Eight Conservatives who had supported the bill a few days before did not show up for the vote, or voted against. Only seven Conservative MPs had the courage to vote for Bill C-398. I am grateful that the other opposition parties in the House voted in favour of the bill.

The Conservative MPs have no excuse for rejecting life-saving legislation that would cost Canadians nothing. As you know, a child dies every three seconds in the world for lack of quality medication. These are the people who lost following the vote on November 28, 2012: people who live with diseases like HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis and who do not have access to the medicines they need. I also believe that the Conservatives lost that night, as they demonstrated that they are incapable of defending what is right and just.

Despite everything, we cannot give up. New Democrats will continue to fight for the reform of Canada's Access to Medicines Regime. It is part of our commitment to Canadians and to the world.

International assistance

Since assuming office as Minister of International Cooperation, and after playing a role in the disastrous handling of the F-35 issue, Minister Julian Fantino has adopted the arbitrary and opaque management style characteristic of Conservative governance in general. Further, it is very worrying to hear the Minister declare that

from now on CIDA will concern itself with developing markets for Canadian companies, especially those in mining and extraction. Not only is this the role of the Department of International Trade, but this short-term promotion of our commercial interests is contrary to the fundamental legal mission of CIDA, which is to combat poverty.

Another worrying situation at CIDA is the significant growth in the share of funding granted to Christian organizations involved in evangelization abroad. This is another example of misdirection by Minister Fantino. The minister seems to be abandoning organizations that have proven themselves on the ground and that deliver concrete results, a good many of them from Quebec, to the benefit of religious groups based mainly in western Canada.

But this is not the minister's first mistake. Last January we were surprised by the announcement of the freeze on Canadian aid to Haiti, an announcement which came just a few days before the third anniversary of the terrible earthquake. Worse still, the minister laid unqualified blame on the Haitians for their misfortunes, with no consideration for the magnitude of the challenges they are facing, the socio-historical context, or the real progress made in the last few years.

It is true that much work remains to be done in Haiti. There are an estimated 358,000 people all over the island still living in the camps, in precarious conditions. Aid should be maintained to allow for the rebuilding of infrastructure still in ruins, and to help families return home, but also to build the institutions and the capacities the country needs over the long term. The NDP is urging the Canadian government to continue to provide financial assistance to the government of Haiti and the NGOs in the field.

It is, of course, essential to ensure that this assistance is effective, but this can be done without abandoning a country with which we have been a long-term partner. Canada is a generous, open-minded country, ready to negotiate and to listen. Contrary to the aggressive approach preferred by the Conservatives, this way of working has served our interests and those of the world very well in the past. It is essential that CIDA refocus its approach to international cooperation and adopt an attitude that is rigorous and transparent.

A visit to *Projet Changement*

Last December I had the chance to visit the *Projet Changement* community centre for seniors. Meeting with its team and talking with its lovely clients, I also learned about a local volunteer intervention project called "*Je m'engage dans ma communauté*". For this project, a coaching guide has been created to facilitate the organization of seniors' self-help groups. This is an initiative designed to offer them a tool for taking or retaking control of their individual and collective power to act; it highlights

openness to others, mainly in micro-communities such as those in seniors' residences in low-cost housing and the surrounding neighbourhood.

Devised so it can be tailored to different situations, this tool deserves to be distributed. We encourage those interested to visit the organization's website (**www.projetchangement.com**) or contact the director of *Projet Changement*, Mr. Jean Ouellet, for more information (j.ouellet@projetchangement.com or **514-521-5145**).

For more information please visit www.helene-laverdiere.ca